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### Race, gender, and leadership identity: an autoethnography of reconciliation

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## Race, gender, and leadership identity: an autoethnography of reconciliation

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This article is an autoethnography of the author's journey researching Black men. She highlights two critical incidents during the research process that aided in the formation of her identity as a leader. Drawing on Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* the author also identifies key women leaders whose examples fueled her commitment to addressing issues of race and gender in Black communities. Implications of this autoethnography suggest the necessity for men to interrogate intersections of race and gender alongside women as partners in a communal struggle against oppression.

**Keywords:** autoethnography; race; gender; Black feminist thought; leadership

I began contemplating writing this article in the summer of 2007. I had recently moved for a new job and accidentally opened the box with my journal and field notes from my dissertation. I had intentionally avoided this box because all of the emotions associated with the dissertation process. I wanted to suppress those feelings; however, they would constantly surface. For some reason, I had the courage to read my journal. Hence began the incubation period for this article. It has taken years to complete due to unresolved issues of disappointment, anger, and frustration that arose as I reflected on my dissertation research experience. During this time of reflection, contradictions about my identity as a Black woman scholar emerged. I was in a place of discontent and confusion as I sought to understand the intricacies of how my race and my gender influenced my research experience. I was in the throes of an identity crisis. I was conflicted. I only identified with my Blackness and ignored the woman inside. I sought to make sense of the devaluing experiences and reactions by the men in my study who questioned my motives and level of expertise about leadership. In addition, I experienced similar reactions from Black male scholars with whom I would interact at national and regional academic conferences. Through this autoethnography (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011; Ellis and Bochner 2000; Jones 2005), I will critically analyze how my gender and racial identity played a pivotal role in the development of my leadership identity. By focusing on particular events that occurred during data collection, I will also discuss how my leadership identity was fused by my increasing knowledge about Black women leaders.

In the past, the defining group for conceptualizing leadership knowledge and practice has traditionally been white middle class men and women (Bass 1990; Jean-Marie, Williams, and Sherman 2009; Nkomo 1992; Parker 2005; Parker and

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Olgivie 1996). More recently, Black women scholars (Alston 2000, 2005; Alston and McClellan 2011; Collins 1996, 1998, 2000; hooks 1981; Jean-Marie, Williams, and Sherman 2009; Lubiano 1992; Parker 2005; Roberts 1997) have documented the exclusion of Black women in the construction of leadership knowledge and practice. However, the majority of scholars have focused on the Black woman leader's narrative in the context of battling the constraints and hostility of white patriarchal systems. Rarely do we discuss the leadership experiences of Black women who experience or feel they have experienced gender discrimination from someone in the same racial group or category. Therefore, in this autoethnography, I interrogate rigid notions of gender and how these rigid ideals influence leadership practice in the context of Black education and civil rights.

This paper is presented in four parts. First, I briefly explain the theoretical framework for this autoethnography. Second, I provide the uses of autoethnography and clarify the method of choice. Next, I reflect on my research with Black men that informed my leadership identity. Finally, I conclude with a summation and definition of my leadership identity.

### **Theoretical foundation**

*Black Feminist Thought* (BFT) (Collins 1991, 1996, 2000) and womanist theology (Cannon 1988; Floyd-Thomas 2006; Mitchem 2002) theoretically ground this autoethnography. BFT and womanist theology provide the foundation for situating the experiences of Black women's leadership and activism, particularly my own. The two constructs are vital components to understanding Black women's lived reality and the coping strategies used to empower leadership praxis.

### ***Black feminist thought***

Black feminist epistemology is not new. The construct of Black women's knowledge predates the twenty-first century. Through historical archives, biographical memoirs, and oral traditions, Black women have been articulating their story of coping with gendered racism (Essed 1991). Black women's coping strategies resulted in activism and leadership geared toward a vision of community that opposes the narrative of dominant cultures about our lives (Hine and Thompson 1998; Hull 2001). BFT, as articulated by Collins (1991, 1996, 2000), was born out of the fight for justice as well as the need to create a space to articulate the interlocking forms of oppression. For the sake of this article, I will focus primarily on the intersection of race and gender. However, it must be noted that race and gender are not the only systems of oppression that are viewed as important when using BFT as an analytic tool.

According to Collins (1991, 1996, 2000), BFT places the experiences of Black women at the center of analysis in producing new knowledge about intersecting forms of oppression that impact educational opportunities, economic freedom, and political enfranchisement. Uniquely subjugated as gendered and raced, Black women have articulated and responded to lived experiences through Black feminist epistemologies. Our unique standpoint stimulates discourse and lays the foundation for providing a roadmap to creatively resisting oppression and domination. This autoethnography is just one example of creatively resisting and responding to intersections of race and gender.

Placing Black women's experiences at the center of analysis fosters a paradigm shift in the way we think about oppression (Collins 1996, 2000; Guy-Sheftall

1995). Black women see and experience life through various lenses of interlocking forms of domination. BFT is concerned with the relationship among and between knowledge production, empowerment, self-identification, and resistance. By emphasizing the power of self-definition, BFT speaks to the importance of Black women's activism and leadership spheres of consciousness and freedom (Collins 1991; Guy-Sheftall 1995). Oppression is filled with contradiction. BFT acknowledges such as Black women are agents of knowledge as well as agents of change. Black women who identify with BFT are critical of all traditions and aspects of culture that oppress women. Critiquing aspects of Black culture are also included in this framework. For that reason, BFT is central to this autoethnography.

### *Spirituality*

For many Black women, race and gender are central aspects of our identity (Williams and Wiggins 2010). Collins' (1991) explanation of the Black woman's insider-outsider status is central to who we are as Black women. Prevented from becoming full insiders, Black women have a way of knowing and way of being that is powered by our spiritual connection to humanity, to our communities, and to a higher power or source of divination (Cannon, Johnson, and Sims 2005; Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, and Tyson 2000; Mattis 2002).

Spirituality is hard to define in the contextual lives of Black women. For Black women are not a monolithic group and neither are our spiritual practices. In an attempt to define spirituality, there is a body of scholarship that specifically highlights the importance of Black women's spiritual lives. Dillard (2006, 2008) discusses the spiritual nature of identity. Hull (2001), in conversation with Black feminist scholars, focuses on spirituality as a transforming paradigm in the personal and professional lives of Black women. Whereas these prominent scholars reflect on spirituality in a non-religious context, there is also a large portion of scholarship that emphasizes spiritual traditions within a religious context. This body of scholarship is referred to as womanist theology (Cannon 1988; Floyd-Thomas 2006; Mitchem 2002; Williams 1993).

### *Womanist theology*

Walker (1983) coined the term womanism in an attempt to connect Black women's experiences across the African diaspora. Womanist theory derived from Black women's cultural identity, commitment to survival, and emotional strength. Womanism, similarly to Black feminism, offers a theoretical lens to view, interrogate, and address Black women's experiences with racism, sexism, and classism. Womanism builds on Black feminist epistemologies. According to Walker (1983), womanism is to Black feminism as purple is to lavender. Womanism in general is not religious. However, womanism entered the Black Christian spiritual discourse as a gender-based movement in the 1980s (Williams 1993 as cited in Witherspoon and Taylor 2010). The theory was adopted and applied to the Black Christian experience in an effort to name the oppressive rituals, norms, and mores that affected Black women.

Womanist theologians such as Cannon (1988), Floyd-Thomas (2006), Mitchem (2002), and Williams (1993) use Walker's womanist theory to challenge Black Christian traditions, patriarchy, and rigid notions of sexuality within the Black Christian experience. Womanist theologians examine women's religious meanings and epistemologies, incorporate women's strategies to eradicate oppression within

Black Christian traditions, and interject social justice ideals in relation to educational opportunity, economic liberation, and political power (Witherspoon and Taylor 2010).

As stated, oppression is rife with contradictions and so is the Black Christian experience. Traditionally, the Black church was the bedrock of the Black community. It was the central locale for civil rights meetings, education, and training. For many, including myself, the Black church was very important in building a communal identity of pride and autonomy (Cozart 2010). The Black Christian experience is the source of my identity formation, the nexus of my first leadership experience, but also the place where strict patterns of behavior for Black women and Black men are reinforced. Through the contradictions of my experiences, I rely on Black feminist epistemologies as well as the autoethnographic process to make sense of it all.

## Method

Through autoethnography, I engage in introspection and emotional recall to display the complex notions of gender in a Black leadership context. Autoethnography as a research, writing, and method connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social (Ellis 2004, xix). It is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis 2004; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011; Jones 2005). Spry (2001, 710) states that autoethnography is a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social context. Neumann (1996, 189) elaborates by stating that autoethnography texts democratize the representational sphere of culture by locating the particular experiences of individuals in a tension with dominant expressions of discursive power. Although autoethnographies are situated in personal and lived experiences, readers of autoethnographies are privy to agree or disagree. Whatever the response, the ones who live the experience are most qualified to convey the intricacies and complexities of their lived reality (Collins 1998; Guy-Sheftall 1995; hooks 1984).

By employing autoethnography, I seek to reveal continuous sense-making strategies of where I resist fixed notions of gender. I situate this autoethnography as a by-product of reflecting on my research with Black male educational leaders. The experiences with them and about them are the focal point for examining rigid notions of gender. The Black men in my study were selected based on purposeful criterion sampling (Creswell 2002). They were identified as Black, natural-born American citizens, had a minimum of seven years of leadership and/or supervisory experience, and held a minimum of three years of experience in civic organizations. The research study sought to explore how their racial identity and spirituality influenced their leadership praxis. This article is a reflection of two critical events that forced me to analyze my research experience in an effort to recognize the formation of my own leadership identity. Typically, in autoethnography, the author does not live through experiences solely to make them a part of a published document; rather these experiences are assembled using hindsight (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011).

Autoethnography is a methodology of creative resistance. Creatively resisting oppression and domination are central to Black feminist and womanist theology and undergird this autoethnography. This methodological approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially just and socially conscious act (Adams and Jones 2008; Spry 2001).

***Political moves and driving forces***

Reflecting on my research on Black men has led me to focus on the fluidity of my identity as a Black woman leader. Some of my earliest memories are of me questioning double standards at home and at church. For example, I remember getting chastised by my grandfather for asking why there were only men preachers. Another time, I remember asking my dad if my brother and I could swap chores. My brother was responsible for cutting grass and I was responsible for cleaning the kitchen. Growing up, I learned and adhered to strict gender roles. As a young woman, I struggled with my identity as a Black woman. I often felt that my womanhood was in competition with the men I had grown to love (i.e. my father, brother, uncles, etc.). But as I matured, I came to see how strictly defined categories for manhood and womanhood hindered my understanding of myself as a Black woman and as a leader. During graduate school, I thought I was over these issues of boys' work and girls' work, until I embarked on a research project about Black male leaders. The subliminal messages I learned as a young girl about my role and place in society surfaced as I learned that the men in my study felt the same as those men with whom I interacted growing up. During my research on Black men's leadership praxis, I began to see and feel that the men in my study overlooked and diminished the contributions of Black women's activism and leadership.

Historically, Black women have challenged dominant social structures that have infringed on educational equality and political power (Collier-Thomas and Franklin 2001; Hine and Thompson 1998; Hull and Scott 1982). Black women were diligent about raising concerns about women's rights in Black organizations and meticulous when raising issues of racism in white women's organizations (Alston and McClellan 2011; Davis 1981; Hanson 2003). Historical accounts of Black women's ideology during times of suffrage, anti-slavery debates, and civil rights struggles clearly articulate their position as a "race" plight (Collier-Thomas and Franklin 2001; Davis 1981; Hine and Thompson 1998). Black women launched several organizations designed to defend and improve the rights of their race and their place within it. Black women's struggles for suffrage and civil rights were a form of resistance and group survival (Collins 2000). Many Black women believed:

If they worked for the poor, they worked for Black women. And if they worked for Black women, they worked for the race. Since in their minds, a "race could rise no higher than its women", they felt that when they improved the condition of Black women, they necessarily improved the condition of the race. (White 1999, 113)

Yet the creed of betterment espoused by many Black clubwomen overlay the sometimes bitter commentary on Black men for their failures as supporters and protectors, while often reinforcing sexist ideology (White 1999). Sexist sentiments and non-supportive experiences are reiterated in biographical accounts of prominent Black women educators and activists such as Dr. Mary Church Terrell, Mary McLeod Bethune, Frances Harper, Harriet Tubman, Septima Poinsette Clark, Ella Baker, and Dorothy Cotton (Clark 1962; Collier-Thomas and Franklin 2001; Hall 1976a, 1976b; Hine 1993; Hine and Thompson 1998; Payne 1995). Despite the heart-breaking accounts and hurtful experiences, these women stayed the course. They relied on their faith, their dedication to service, and never lost sight of freedom, equality, and liberation for the race and used that as energy to fight for human and civil rights. I use their legacies of determination, service, and resilience as examples



that I too can overcome agony and not lose sight of the bigger picture. The next section is a reflection of two critical incidents that were painful, but aided in the formation of my leadership identity.

### **Broken, but NOT shattered**

#### ***The escalator***

AERA (the American Educational Research Association) opened my eyes to the varied and plentiful opportunities to connect with up-and-coming scholars on research projects and make life-long friends. At this time, I attended many early career mentoring sessions. I was proud, and a bit apprehensive to discuss my research for fear of rejection and negative responses. I remember being introduced to many “it” scholars that had similar interests to mine. But for some reason, one stands out. He was tall, dark, and kind of handsome. I remember him specifically because he was wearing a really nice tie. I tend to notice men’s clothes because it reminds me of my uncle Darryl who is a very nice dresser. Nevertheless, he was pleasant and asked me about what my experiences were in researching Black women. This pissed me off because the gentlemen that introduced us stated that my research was on Black male leadership and spirituality. Needless to say, I proceeded to discuss my study on Black male educational leaders, pretending as if he did not offend me, and expressed that I would love to discuss my research further since we had similar interests. He obliged (or so I thought). When I turned around to get on the hotel escalator, I saw him throw my business card in the trash. Wow, what was that all about? I wanted to turn around and ask him why he threw my card away. I also wanted to give him a piece of my mind and say some choice words. I did neither, I could feel tears watering in my eyes, but did not let them fall. Instead, I told myself, “hold your head up;” I pretended that the encounter did not hurt, but deep down inside, it did. Looking back, I wish I would have had the courage to ask him why he threw my card away.

I remember the escalator incident as if it happened yesterday. I walked away speechless, angry, and frustrated. Most importantly, I was disappointed. I was disappointed in my response and his. I regret not confronting his behavior as I am left only to assume what his motives and intentions driving his actions were. As I reflect on the incident, I am reminded of my grandfather’s response to my question about male preachers. I wonder if my motives were in question or was it my inquiry about Black men’s roles and/or leadership within the Black community? I can only draw from other Black woman leaders such as Septima Poinsette Clark to make an inference.

Septima Clark was monumental in the voter’s rights and the civil rights movements. She is called the Queen Mother of the Civil Rights movement. She was a dynamic educator, strategic leader, and highly skilled community organizer. She even worked alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC). Her leadership was vital and instrumental in the success of civil rights efforts. In her personal memoir and autobiography, she poignantly speaks of her experience working with Black men. Her work at the SCLC was rewarding, but she endured many hardships. She was often at odds with Dr. King and Reverend Abernathy about the treatment of herself and other women colleagues (Dorothy Cotton and Ella Baker) as they were forced to take a back seat in the decision-making process (Crawford, Rouse, and Woods 1993; Robnett 1996). From her memoir, Clark said:

I was on the executive staff of SCLC, but men on it didn't listen to me too well. They liked to send me into many places because I could always make a path in to get people to listen to what I have to say. But those men didn't have faith in women, none whatsoever . . . you can work behind the scenes all you want . . . But don't come forth and try to lead. That's not the kind of thing they wanted. (Brown 1990, 77–8 as cited in Alston and McClellan 2011)

Clark and her colleagues in the movement experienced traditions of men who predominantly held leadership positions in the Black church. To some scholars, their experience is attributed to Black men seeking to control social space (Gyant and Atwater 1996). Clark was well aware of the role women had had ascribed to them. She acknowledged this and said:

I didn't criticize Dr. King . . . I adored him. The way I think about him now comes from my experience in the women's movement. But in those days, of course, in the Black church men were always in charge. It was just the way things were. Like other Black ministers, Dr. King didn't think too much about the way women could contribute. But working in the movement, he changed the lives of so many people that [he was] getting to the place where he would have to see women as more than sex symbols. I see this as one of the weaknesses of the civil rights movement, the way men looked at women. (Brown 1990, 78–9 as cited in Alston and McClellan 2011)

Women such as Septima Clark clearly articulated the contradictions of the Civil Rights Movement. They were competent, valuable, skilled, and determined for Blacks to no longer occupy second-class citizenship. I am thankful and forever indebted to these women that even through devaluing and degrading experiences, they never lost sight of a communal fight for equity and justice. To understand the challenges raised by women's [mis]treatment in the Civil Rights Movement requires an assessment and understanding of the influence of heterosexist, Eurocentric gender ideology appropriated by the Black community.

According to Collins (2000), rigid and hegemonic ideologies of white masculinity and femininity as the model for Black women and men to emulate are problematic. Rigid gender ideologies are damaging and have disastrous effects on liberating social projects. The either/or definitions of masculinity and femininity stifle cooperation and create dissension among Black leaders, Black activists, and yes, Black scholars, whose goals are to be unified against systems of oppression. Consequently, and as seen in Clark's memoirs, gender tension and sexism helped to undermine the stamina of the movement. Where the lived experiences of racism unite, the lived experience of gender and sexism divides. Bambara (1970) as cited in Collins (2000) echoes similar sentiments when she says "that one of the most characteristic features of our community is the antagonism between our men and women" (106).

### **An eerie silence**

It is mid-March. Winters off of the Great Lakes can be harsh, but I am excited because it is my final interview with Mr. Aaron. Mr. Aaron is in his mid- to late-60s. He is very charming, smart, and very passionate about Black political activism. He was born and raised in a small town in South Carolina. I was always intrigued by and interested in his stories about segregated education and his bouts with Jim Crow laws. Our conversations were always insightful and informative. Nevertheless, it was our last scheduled meeting. I was waiting in the conference room for nearly



20 minutes; I could see him trying to finish up a telephone call as I waited. His office was adjacent to the conference room. I hated the conference room because of its moldy smell and the ambiance of the room was stale; unlike our conversations. He finally enters and the interview goes as planned. I ended the interview as I always did by asking him if he had anything else he wanted to add to the conversation. This time he replied yes, I have a question. "Why are you getting your PhD? You don't need that. You need to settle down, get married, and raise a family." An eerie silence hovered over the conference room as a cloud does during a storm.

I never answered his question. I responded with a question of my own: "Why must I choose?" Neither of us received the answer we were looking for. Instead our silence was acquiescence. Our silence spoke heavily to the assumptions about men's roles and women's duties. We never explicitly spoke of these "traditional" roles, but they were implied in our conversation. In concert with Black feminist scholars, womanist theologians interrogate assumptions such as marriage as a pre-requisite to womanhood as well as other traditions and patriarchal ideals that communicate strict gender roles within the Black experience.

Many scholars have documented and interrogated the negative effects of gender politics and sexism within the Black community (Bambara 1970; Collins 2000; Crawford, Rouse, and Woods 1993; Floyd-Thomas 2006; Hull and Scott 1982; Josephs 2008). Mr. Aaron's concept of men's roles and women's roles mirrored those of my father's understanding when I was a young girl. Having reconciled some of those issues with my dad only fueled my desire to do the same with other men, especially in the academy. The essence of the message in this autoethnography is that racism is the primary issue confronting Black Americans. However, acknowledging sexism is a pertinent issue that needs to be addressed. According to Gordon (1987, 46), sexism in Black men emanates from their lack of power due to racism resulting in "misdirected hostilities" toward Black women. She expounds by stating that tensions between Black women and men would diminish when the effects of racism are diminished.

Theoretically and experientially, Black women and men should be allies with one another in the fight for equality and justice. Black liberation represents freedom from sexism and racism and embraces a Black female/male partnership in struggle (Gordon 1987, 46). Through this autoethnography and by way of my leadership praxis, I challenge Black men to critique and analyze sexism and gender politics with their peers and colleagues. Begin to develop frameworks that situate the condition of Black women alongside that of Black men (see Byrd and Guy-Sheftall 2001; Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003) in an effort to create leadership frameworks and praxis that diminish and destroy interlocking forms of oppression.

## **Leadership**

### ***My leadership identity***

I used autoethnography to engage in critical reflection and emotional recall of two critical incidents that helped shape my leadership identity. I sought to illuminate how my experience conducting research with and about Black men conveyed feelings of conflict, disappointment, and pain. Reflecting on these specific incidents has helped me reconcile the emotions I felt during the research process. I am more confident in the need to address issues of gender within Black communities.

Being Black has always been an integral component of my identity. Having the privilege to attend Civil Rights tours as a teenager and listening to my dad's stories

of growing up in Alabama afforded me the saliency of my Black identity. However, it was my research on Black men and my interactions with male scholars that caused me to re-evaluate my identity as a woman. I had an unchanging loyalty to my Blackness, but had a tendency to ignore my womanness. The men in my family are dear to me and have an unexplainable impact on how I view the world. I was a daddy's girl. I adored my father with every fiber of my being and loved my uncles and grandpa all the same. But as I write this autoethnography, I realized that somehow along the way I learned that I needed to reject my womanness in order to accept my Blackness. I happily rejoice in knowing that this is not the case. For me, race and gender intersect daily and affect my interactions with others (Collins 2000). Within white communities, it is hard to distinguish if my race or my gender is affecting the interaction. However, in this autoethnography, I posit that with Black men, it is my gender. Therefore, in alignment with Black feminist and womanist epistemologies, I situate my experience with Black men through the research process as a creative resistance to strict patterns and ideologies about gender roles.

This autoethnography has been a struggle and one of accountability. I am accountable to my story, but also vulnerable to judgments. My leadership identity is salient as I identify myself as a critical servant leader (Alston and McClellan 2011; McClellan 2006, 2010). Similar to women such as Septima Clark, Ella Baker, and Dorothy Cotton, I too have experienced ambiguity and pain associated with my gendered and racial status. But knowing that these women faced brutality, isolation, and even death in their fight for justice gives me strength to raise issues of concern in Black communities. The leadership of these women was tempered, strategic, and motivated by a moral code of justice. I have admired these women and other Black women leaders from afar through readings, literature, and documentaries. The admiration of these women mirrors the African concept Ubuntu – "I am because we are. We are because I am." The purpose of my leadership is to pick up the mantle from where they laid it down. Prominent Black women leaders raised issues of gender and so must I, in conjunction with other Black scholars. My goal is not to demonize Black men in this autoethnography. Instead, I seek to encourage readers of this autoethnography to participate in the story and find ways to add other forms of oppression as units of analysis to interrogate race and gender in the lives of Black people.

### **Moving forward: the leadership challenge**

The fight for equality, justice, and civil rights is one of resistance, solidarity, and hope. Black women are outsiders who participate, but do not hold full membership in the Black male community (Collins 1991). Yet, the Black feminist perspective is a humanist vision of community where Black women and men are nurtured in order to confront oppressive social conditions. To confront issues affecting Black women without including Black men and vice versa is problematic because it weakens the communal fight against oppression. To deny the intricate relationships that comprise the totality of the Black community forces one another to compete against instead of working with. By grounding this autoethnography in Black feminist epistemology, my experience as a Black woman is at the center of my analysis, I use dialog in assessing knowledge claims, and care about the totality of the entire Black community (Collins 1991). Finally, Black feminist epistemology embraces social change as a change in individual consciousness coupled with the social transformation of political and economic institutions. Therefore, a premise in this autoethnography is to

challenge readers, particularly men, to interrogate issues of race, gender, and other forms of oppression alongside those of women.

### Notes on contributor

Patrice McClellan is an assistant professor and director of the Master of Organizational Leadership program at Lourdes University. She has published in various journals. Her most recent article was titled "Toward critical servant leadership in graduate schools of education: From theoretical construct to social justice praxis". Additionally, she is the co-author of *Herstories: Leading with the Lessons of the Lives of Black Women Activists*. Her research interests are leadership development, leadership identity, and qualitative methodology.

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